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Methodology of Integrated Language Learning Projects for University Undergraduates

Metodología de proyectos integrados de aprendizaje de Idiomas para estudiantes universitarios

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ABSTRACT:

Integrated approach to a foreign language learning strategy has been immensely increasing for the last decades. The article is focused on theoretical and applied issues of language learning in the framework of integrated projects using the Internet resources. A special attention is paid to the compatibility of the main principles and fundamentals according to the target learning of English as a second language. Some important roles and functions of teachers and all stockholders involved in academic training of modern specialists are noted. The most promising views and approaches to compiling appropriate educational programs that comprise contemporary goals and objectives, standards, and local interests and needs in business English are presented. Recommendations on the course structure are given, and the key aspects of language competences development as well as personal and professional qualities of the undergraduates are selected.
Keywords: integrated project, variable components, compatibility, motivation, learning outcomes, assessment

RESUMEN:

El enfoque integrado para el aprendizaje de idiomas extranjeros ha aumentado enormemente en las últimas décadas. El artículo se centra en cuestiones teóricas y se aplica al aprendizaje de idiomas en el marco de proyectos integrados que utilizan los recursos de Internet. Se presta especial atención a la compatibilidad de los principios y fundamentos principales de acuerdo con el aprendizaje objetivo del Inglés como segundo idioma. Se señalan algunos funciones importantes de los profesores y de todos las partes interesadas que participan en la educación académica de los especialistas modernos. Se presentan los puntos de vista y enfoques prometedores para compilar programas educativos apropiados que incluyan metas y objetivos contemporáneos, estándares e intereses y necesidades locales en Inglés de negocios. Se ofrecen recomendaciones sobre la estructura del curso y se seleccionan los aspectos clave del desarrollo de las competencias lingüísticas, así como las cualidades personales y profesionales de los estudiantes.
Palabras clave: C

1. Introduction

Project-based learning approach has become more popular due to a number of reasons. It is

the integrated project that allows rational combining and mixing programs, courses and techniques based on the compatibility of possible principles to achieve goals and objectives in foreign language learning. In this regard much attention should be paid to the *autonomous* principle of learning mode as it implies an interactive participation of the students at every stage of learning / teaching processes, and it also reflects their individual interests and motivation.

It has been noted that "for *English as Second Language (ESL)* students, project-based learning typically integrated the four skills (*listening*, *speaking, reading* and *writing*) and encouraged the use of English outside the classroom (Marquez K., 2016,). Student projects may be *collaborative* or *independent*, and require students to use their developing language skills to negotiate, solve problems and acquire new information". *Authentic project tasks* according to some researches (Haffner M. & Fun C., 2012) should encourage cooperation, communication, development of creative and critical thinking competencies, as well as the use of modern technologies.

Then Schleicher A. (2015), director for Education and Skills of the 21st century (OECD, Boston, Massachusetts), when assessing the concept of "four-dimensional education" drew the attention of the experts to the fact that "it is necessary to clearly define the spaces, in which educators, curriculum planners, policymakers and learners could establish what should be learned, in their context and for their future". Answering a similar crucial question a number of researchers focused on training programs that needed to be thoroughly reviewed for the four aspects: *knowledge*, *skills, character* and *meta-learning* (Fadel Ch., Vitalik M., Drilling B., 2011), "Adaptation for the 21st century should mean a review of each indicator of certain spheres of life and the interrelationship between them. Our educational systems should be oriented to the positive goals of personal competences formation, knowledge and expediency for all students." All the students should learn to consider the results of their actions, and in the long term, to act meaningfully in the environment, to reflect and adapt to the changes in the world".

This paper is to focus on the methodological content of foreign language learning techniques because its components allow developing undergraduates' general cultural and professional communication competences (Yovanovich T., Prom N., Toporkova O, 2018). Following modern teachers-methodologists, a methodological content is considered to be based on speech orientation, situational backgrounds, functionality, individualization, and novelty (Solovova, 2010). These components define the features, structure, principles and technologies of modern foreign language training forms. The aim of this article is to describe how the above-mentioned components are implemented during foreign language classes' arrangements with bachelor and master students in and out of classroom spaces as well.

2. Research Methodology

Various stages of the present study involved the application a number of methods: method of theoretical analysis of related psychological, pedagogical and methodological literature, comparative method, method of generalization of accumulated experience in the field of study, survey and diagnostic methods (interviewing, questionnaires, testing), observation methods (direct and indirect observation) and predictive methods (simulation and forecasting).

The study was carried out at Volgograd State Technical University, with covering 164 students and faculty members of the Department of Foreign Languages. Theoretical and experimental work was carried out in several stages. At the first exploratory and cognitive stage (2016-2017), a targeted analysis of literary sources including foreign reviews was made; the initial research positions were defined, and the authors' own experience in applying project technologies in the work of university teachers was generalized. At the second stage (2017-2018), the scientific and pedagogical foundations for the application of advanced project technologies in the faculty's educational process were clarified. Then the ways of improving the educational process were developed while teaching the university students and undergraduates within the framework of the project "Integrated Second Language (English) Learning". When assessing and generalizing the results of practical

research, the methods of theoretical analysis were applied: questionnaire surveying, interviewing, evaluation-prognostic techniques for the purpose of analyzing students' language skills and personal qualities; diagnostic methods (testing, generalization of variable characteristics); methods of statistical data processing.

3. Discussion

3.1. Methodological Content Components

Project teaching policies and practices of a foreign language is characterized by a number of different and interrelated aspects, components, principles and factors (Hafner M. & Fun C.; Mahboob Ah. & Tilakaratna N., 2012).

The following types of integrated projects are of interest for consideration (Marquez K., 2016):

3.1.1. Technology projects

Technology-based projects not only enhance language learning, but also help students improve their technical skills. One common type of project is to encourage students to use the Internet to research a topic of interest. The results of their research (creative work) can be used to *construct a website*, *write a report* or *give a presentation*. Technology-based projects are not limited to computers, however. Using video and audio recorders, students can create documentation of interviews, poetry readings, skits or plays. Recordings may be presented in class or posted to a website such as YouTube for wider viewing.

3.1.2. Writing projects

Writing projects involve far more than just writing. A popular class project for ESL (English as a second language) students is a class newsletter or newspaper. Students use *verbal communication*, *analytical thinking* and *problem-solving* skills while working together to choose topics and types of articles; edit and revise contents; and design the layout. Other possible writing project for ESL students includes letters to pen pals, political figures or celebrities. Students may also enjoy developing short stories, various info, notes or other types of creative writing, which can be bound together into a class book or published to a website.

3.1.3. Community projects

English classes are a valuable way to learn the language, but eventually students will need opportunities to use their newly acquired language skills in a real-world context. *Volunteering*, for example, gives students a meaningful opportunity to practice their developing English language skills, as well as engage with the local community and learn about culture and language outside the classroom. Volunteer opportunities can be a one-time event or an ongoing activity, and may take place at locations such as public libraries, community and charity events, schools and soup kitchens. Possible volunteer responsibilities could include helping with neighborhood cleanups, tutoring children, providing logistical support for fundraisers or doing clerical or translation tasks.

3.1.4. Presentation Projects

Presentation projects can take many forms. Often a presentation is one element of a larger project. For instance, students who take on a research or community project may present information about their project to their classmates. A presentation may also be a project unto itself. In this way, students may have an informative talk to their group-mates. Some experts (Marquez K., Morrison, B., Curry, N., 2016) believe that the presentation can be a project in itself. *Presentation projects* can be basic and low-tech, with the students' spoken communication as the main focus, or they can involve technical or creative components such as advanced visual aids for solving local problems, extensive research or video clips and other props.

One of the most important principles in this respect is the principle of *autonomy*. In a given situation, we are talking about the Autonomous work of the students on the project tasks,

and their interaction with groupmates outside the classroom and the use of all possible means, including hardware and software and Internet resources.

3.2. Sample tasks on integrated projects

It should be stated that presented types of projects are very relevant for our students of the technical University, as English for them is also a foreign language for business communication, based on standards that underlie the foreign language programs of the 3rd generation for higher education (FGOS VPO, 2016). As for technological projects, their role is also steadily increasing, as they actually allow us to effectively expand the educational space beyond the classroom and enhance both linguistic and extra linguistic skills and competencies of students (Pakharukova V., Toporkova O., Yankina E., 2016). Thus, for second-year students of Economics and management department group tasks with the distribution of roles and student leaders have a prolonged character, and while preparing them, we could carry out an intermediate quality control of training, spending if necessary, a few minutes in the classroom. The following project tasks are offered to our students and graduates depending on their specialty direction: "Web-site design", "Computer programs for supermarkets", "Advertising Campaign Project", "TV Commercial Project", "Trends in the development of the regional economy ", "Event marketing research" and others. Basic training is performed through the Internet resources – email, web-sites, Skype, social networks.

Last year, we started at our language centre the so-called Julia's Club – organized by a young teacher-trainee from the United States, Julia M. – where everyone could take part in the discussion and role presentation of project tasks on the proposed topics: "Travelling", "Role models" (November), "American Culture vs Russian Culture", "Winter Holidays" (December, 2017). We would like also to note our language self-training center (Self-Access Language Centre), established for students and undergraduates where they can get various consultations of teachers working at the Department.

A special attention is paid to develop our students' skills of writing their thoughts and views, starting with freshmen students, and it is, above all, small thematic messages (small stories and emails) in both written and oral forms, as well as the design of advertising materials (leaflets, prospects). One of the most important creative works is the preparation and writing an Essay on "My future specialty" for the 2nd year students.

Social projects also take place in our academic process. One of the joint projects with the Department of "Advertising and public relations", presented in English, was devoted to solving environmental problems of our region (Zarudneva A., Pakharukova V., 2017).

In our city (Volgograd), summer, 2018, there was held the World Cup, and the students of Technical University participated in this event as volunteers, and they could practice their communication skills in real situations and activities.

The study and analysis of the project approach to foreign language learning has shown that it is one of the most promising methods of linguistic skills and competencies development, as well as personal and professional qualities of the future specialist in a modern society. First of all, those are such important qualities as responsibility, persistence and persistency in achieving goals and objectives, leadership and business qualities, tolerant and ethical attitude towards the colleagues and business partners. Moreover, some students with rather poor knowledge of English and weak communication skills could take part in the project activities and improve their language skills. The current situation on the integrated project on the one hand made the mentioned students cooperate with the other mates and get help and support, and on the other hand provided the circumstances for language competences and personal qualities development.

Since the modern world community demands and local economic needs are high, we can say, quite strict requirements to the future specialist, and, that is why, learning courses (programs) and curricula should be regularly reviewed and adjusted.

The emphasis on the *educational space*, in our opinion, is the *integration mechanism* that contributes to the development of various language competencies and communication skills

of the future professionals. And the learning of a foreign language should be considered in the context of changes, as well as global and local trends of the social development.

As the basis of the project approach to learning the second language (English) some *principles* can be considered.

Following the experts in applied linguistics of Australian University (Mahboob Ah. & Tilakaratna N. 2012), there have been identified six principles: 1) **C**ollaboration, 2) **R**elevance, 3) **E**vidence, 4) **A**lignment, 5) **T**ransparency, 6) **E**mpowerment. In short, these six principles are combined in "**CREATE**", which is associated with creativity and a certain perspective.

It is obvious that the principles are aimed at expanding the educational component, including the learning space. The researchers believe that these principles are in no way prescriptive or immutable; they should be evaluated on the basis of regular feedback and consultation, and revised as necessary over time.

The role of the teacher seems to be changing in the frames of integrated project paradigm. *"One of the important roles of the teacher is to give an adequate expert evaluation of the achievements, and not to control the learners" (*Little D.; Fabela-Cárdenas M., 2012).

In this regard, it is appropriate to disclose the aspect of autonomy in terms of integrated project learning a foreign language. It has been stated that the development of autonomy in language learning is governed by three basic pedagogical principles: • learner involvement – engaging learners to share responsibility for the learning process (the affective and the metacognitive dimensions); • learner reflection – helping learners to think critically when they plan, monitor and evaluate their learning (the metacognitive dimensions); • appropriate target language use – using the target language as the principal medium of language learning (the communicative and the metacognitive dimensions).

We also asked ourselves what the teacher should do according to these three principles. In this sense the teacher should:

 • use the target language as the preferred medium of classroom communication and require the same of her/his learners; • involve the learners in a non-stop quest for good learning activities, which are shared, discussed, analyzed and evaluated with the whole class – in the target language, to begin with in very simple terms; • help the learners to set their own learning targets and choose their own learning activities, subjecting them to discussion, analysis and evaluation – again, in the target language; • require the learners to identify individual goals but pursue them through collaborative work in small groups; • require the learners to keep a written record of their learning – plans of lessons and projects, lists of useful vocabulary, whatever texts they themselves produce; • engage the learners in regular evaluation of their progress as individual learners and as a class – in the target language.

Following the academic standards, we have determined the possibility of *integrated studying a foreign language* having taken into account the compatibility of various factors, starting with curriculum and individual goals and objectives, learning environment and educational space to the provision of educational equipment, teaching materials, as well as needs and preferences of students for learning a foreign language.

As for the whole set of goals and objectives, they coincide to a greater or lesser extent, and it gave us the opportunity of combining academic (classroom) and extra-curricular activities in the spatial framework of our University. Moreover, it appeared possible to combine in this way our efforts and capacities of the University (the language center with well-equipped computer classrooms for independent work), as well as hard - and software (Internet resources), with those having at home. The development of autonomous learning strategies is known to become possible as a result of improved computer and Internet technologies.

It should be also noted that goals, needs and interests of the students are the most variable factors for many reasons.

In this regard the most of our efforts were concentrated on the development a number of important students' qualities, and it was primarily the responsibility shared, at least with the

other participants of the educational process (mates, teachers, consultants, organizers, etc.), for the learning outcomes. Students were also involved in the organizational activities in order to gain experience of autonomous acquiring of language knowledge and skills, as well as developing the competencies required for the use in different situations.

Having compared and analyzed the above presented approaches and the given principles we formulated the following *integration factors* affecting the implementation of strategies for autonomous learning within a technical University: - *informativity*, - *compatibility*, - *readiness* (including technical training – TT), - *involvement*, - *flexibility*, - *integration,* - *evaluation*, - *continuity*.

A special accent, in our opinion, should be made on the *moral component* of autonomous aspect of learning in general and on learning a foreign language in particular, taking into consideration the current shift towards dependent and consumer attitude towards the life.

There exists a great need for developing such qualities as sense of purpose, autonomy in attitudes and decision-making, strong will, charisma, persistence, patience, tolerance towards the others and just honesty in the relationships of personal and business nature as well.

The implementation of the students' autonomy in learning activities on mastering a foreign language will allow us to maintain and develop the system of continuous language education. However, many questions have ambiguous and variable nature, and they should be fully explored and tested in a further project work on integrated approach to foreign language learning within the University and beyond its boundaries.

3.3. Assessments of the research data

Sharing the above approaches and guided by the results of our research and own practical work on the project technology of English language teaching, we can add one more principle: 7) educational **S**pace, which is structurally integrated into the presented system of principles in the form of CREATE**S**.

With regard to the principle of *collaboration*, it refers to the cooperation of all stakeholders in the field of foreign language teaching strategy – from the experts and officials in the field of education to the teachers, students and local administration The *relevance* principle is considered in relation to the key policy areas in the field of education, practices and training materials. The principle of *evidence* is interpreted ambiguously and concludes that it is not always possible to provide a large amount of evidence to support successful practices. The principle of *alignment* should be the basis for the development of the curriculum and training materials, which in turn need to be combined with the classroom training practices. Further, these practices should be evaluated according to whether the students demonstrate the required level of language proficiency, as well as defined skills and competencies depending on the specific context. The principle of *transparency* requires that strategic goals, tactic objectives and results were visible, accessible and justified to all stakeholders. Finally, the principle of *empowerment* means that the ultimate goal of any project of foreign language teaching should be to empower all the stakeholders (teachers, students, organizers, managers, experts) through collaborative, relevant, evidence-based and transparent practices.

It is appropriate here to refer to the aspect of autonomy and related points of view: 'autonomously or independently it does not mean alone, alone with himself'. 'In addition to the teacher-student dynamics, another critical component in the development of effective learner autonomy is a peer network. Contrary to what the term might evoke in popular usage, learner autonomy does not involve secluding oneself in a cork-lined room with a mountain of learning materials. This is all the more true for the social phenomenon of human speech. Computer interactions can simulate aspects of this process, but it is not nearly the same as direct human-to-human communication' (Godwin-Jones R., 2011).

It is not less important, in our view, to find a good balance between communications with real partners and supporting gadgets or interactive training programs, otherwise we can face some undesirable consequences or deviations in psychological terms at least. Evidently

fashionable devices must occupy the right place in our learning and communication processes.

The problem of loneness is increasingly spreading in spite of all quick and "useful" gadgets and devices, and it has become much deeper than decades ago. Quite large numbers of young people have been used and often prefer to communicate by means of various gadgets as if hiding behind newfangled devices and concealing their feelings, emotions, and sometimes real goals and desires.

The intermediate results of our two-year research and experimental work carried out with the students and first-year undergraduates on integrated language learning projects (English) are given in the Summary table.

Table 1

Groups	Level range of language skills developments		Assessments
	before %	after %	
1-year students *Experimental* *Control*	25-30 20-25	45-55 30-35	tests, questionnaires, situational tasks, interviews
2-year students *Experimental* *Control*	45-50 30-35	55-65 35-45	tests, questionnaires, situational tasks, interviews
1-year undergraduates *Experimental* *Control*	45-55 35-40	60-75 40-50	tests, questionnaires, situational tasks, interviews

Column (before %) in the Table shows the pre-test results and indicates that the difference between experimental and control groups was not initially significant, in comparison with the column (after %) where integrated projects of language learning (English) were used as a basic technique opposed to the control groups with traditional methods of learning. Summary table also shows the percentage (%) increases in the range of language skills and competences developments in experimental groups.

To accomplish the objective of the present study, the following instruments were employed:

A placement test: Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT, 2009) was used partially as a placement test to determine the participants' level range. Its reliability was reported in some sources since it has been considered as a standard test. The pre-test included items extracted from the participants' text book "Select readings: Intermediate" developed by Lee (2011). The pre-test included 25 multiple-choice items and it focused on vocabulary recognition and grammar and text items. The test was taken to evaluate student's ability in vocabulary recognition and grammar forms at the beginning of the research period. The post-test was a modified pre-test with the same content but of a different form to avoid the learners' reminding.

Our students were also tested by a set of aspect tasks for reading, listening, speaking and writing, before they started the course, and after they completed the training course on specially designed integrated programmes that lasted for two years. There were developed some special tests, as well as questionnaires and situational tasks with evaluation criteria.

Having ultimately, analyzed and summarized the promising data we decided to step forward in the direction of mutual efforts and participation.

4. Conclusions

In order to ensure strategy and practice expansion, we believe that educational projects themselves must be viable in the social, political, economic and cultural environments in which they operate. And the *integrated project* could be defined as an *arrangement (organizational) form,* which gives a real opportunity to comprehensively develop language competences, personal and business qualities at expanding the educational spaces through modern Internet resources, and combining classroom and extracurricular activities.

In conclusion, we confess that the principles outlined in this review are not mutually exclusive. In fact, we suppose that they are, in one way or another, interrelated with each other. The given principles are applicable in various contexts and have a number of meanings. As noted above, it is also important to remember that these principles themselves need to be regularly reviewed and updated to maintain their relevance, validity and applicability in diverse educational contexts. Our research is going to be continued and moved to the next stage.

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